

07/23/21 Friday

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Pentagon Says Systems Produced By Da Jiang Innovations 'Pose Potential Threats' to National Security

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Dozens of Chinese firms, many of which have outpaced Western tech giants to become world leaders in their industries, have now become targets by the US government, which claims they are tools of espionage.

The Pentagon has reversed a previous decision about drones made by Chinese firm Da Jiang Innovations (DJI), saying they "pose potential threats" to US national security.

In a [Friday statement](#), the US Department of Defense acknowledged that last month, an audit by the US Department of the Interior [cleared DJI drones](#) for government use after a [lengthy audit](#). "This report was inaccurate and uncoordinated, and its unauthorized release is currently under review by the department," the DoD said.

The Pentagon further noted that a 2018 ban on buying off-the-shelf drones from any manufacturer, not just DJI, is still in place, but that Congress has also added specific bans on Chinese-made products to the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the bill that funds the Pentagon.

However, there remain some cases in which such a purchase might be approved, such as [last September](#), when the US Air Force bought several DJI drones with the specific intent of taking them apart to discover their weaknesses.

DJI is the world's largest manufacturer of commercial drones, supplying as much as three-quarters of drones worldwide, according to [industry estimates](#). As with many other rising Chinese tech companies, [such as Huawei](#), the world's largest cellphone and telecommunications equipment manufacturer on the planet, the US has claimed DJI products are insecure, vulnerable to both hacking and spying using built-in backdoors mandated by the Chinese socialist state.

Like Huawei and dozens of other Chinese companies, DJI was added to a Department of Commerce [blacklist in December](#), effectively banning sale of their products in the US unless the buyer has a specific license to do so.

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Caracas Accuses US of 'Flagrant Provocation' After USAF Plane Illegally Flies Over Venezuela
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to the Venezuelan Defense Ministry, a US military aircraft entered Venezuelan airspace on Friday, drawing condemnation from Caracas for the violation of the country's sovereignty.

According to a [statement by the Defense Ministry](#), a US Air Force C-17 Globemaster III heavy transport aircraft crossed the Venezuelan-Colombian border on Thursday evening and for three minutes flew over the western Venezuelan state of Zulia, covering about 14 miles of territory. The statement notes that the aircraft committed the violation while engaged in a larger set of drills that involved American F-16 and RC-135 aircraft. The latter was confirmed by independent aircraft tracking sources to have been an RC-135V/W Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft, which flew several laps over Colombia's northeastern La Guajira, Cesar, and Magdalena states on Thursday evening.

The ministry noted this is the 21st time this year that US aircraft have violated the Maiquetía Flight Information Region, another name for the airspace governed by Venezuelan air traffic controllers. It called this "a serious violation of international aeronautical standards."

"We reiterate before the international community and multilateral organizations that the presence of North American bases in Colombian territory represent a permanent threat and constitute an atrocious interference mechanism that significantly affects the stability of the Caribbean and Latin American region where, thanks to the integrationist effort of the Supreme Commander Hugo Chávez, has been working on its consolidation as a Zone of Peace," the ministry added.

A screenshot from an online flight tracker shows the C-17, callsign RCH233, cutting across Sierra de Perijá National Park in Venezuela.

Notably, the RC-135V, callsign COOT43 in the image, is immediately to the west of the park as the C-17 enters Venezuelan airspace. As a signals tracking aircraft, it was likely looking at how the Venezuelan military reacted to the incursion.

"I categorically reject the violation of our sovereign airspace by a US military aircraft," Venezuelan Defense Minister Gen. Vladimir Padrino [said on Twitter](#) on Friday. "This occurs when [Colombian President] Ivan Duque slavishly hands over the sovereignty of the Colombian people to foreign military bases. It is a serious threat to the entire region."

US military cooperation with Colombia has come under scrutiny recently after [the Pentagon confirmed](#) that seven of the Colombian ex-military men arrested in Haiti in connection with the assassination of Haitian [President Jovenel Moise](#) earlier this month had received special training from the US as part of their service, including from the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Whether the Thursday incident was an accident or not, the US also purposefully violates Venezuela's claimed waters in what it calls "Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS), a political stunt in which a US warship ignores a nation's claims if the US considers them "excessive," effectively challenging the country to defend its sovereignty. [Once such incident](#) in July 2020 was denounced by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza as "an inexcusable act of provocation" and "erratic and childish."

It's not as if the aircraft was too lumbering to change its course, either, as a Royal Australian Air Force C-17 demonstrated in 2019 as it dodged skyscrapers in Brisbane to celebrate the end of the Riverfire arts and culture show.

The Pentagon has not yet commented on the incident.

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As COVID Cases Rise Once More, Alabama Governor Says It's 'Time to Start Blaming the Unvaccinated'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As COVID-19 cases rise sharply in Alabama, state officials are rushing to convince residents to put their hesitancy aside and get the vaccine. The southern state has the lowest vaccination rate of any US state.

Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, a Republican, told reporters on Friday in plain language that unvaccinated people were central to the problem of the latest outbreak.

"I don't know, you tell me", she said in response to a reporter asking what it is going to take to overcome vaccine hesitancy in the state. "Folks are supposed to have common sense. But it's time to start blaming the unvaccinated folks, not the regular folks. It's the unvaccinated folks that are letting us down".

"I want folks to get vaccinated, that's the cure, that prevents everything, why we want to mess around with just temporary stuff? We don't need to encourage people just go halfway with curing this disease. Let's get it done, and we know what it takes to get it done: if we get a shot in your arm. It's safe, it's effective, the data proves that it works, it doesn't cost anything, it saves lives", Ivey said.

"I've done all I know how to do. I can encourage you to do something, but I can't make you take care of yourself".

On Wednesday, Alabama registered 1,567 new COVID-19 cases - the most it's recorded since early February, and 10 times what daily cases were a month ago, [according to data](#) from the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). On Thursday, hospitalisations were at 646 people - a 216% increase from July 1st, according to the [Alabama Political Reporter](#).

Nation's Lowest Vaccination Rate

The [state is also 51st](#) out of 50 states and the District of Columbia in terms of vaccination, with just 33.9% of the state's 4.9 million people fully vaccinated. State health data shows that, like the rest of the US, vaccination rates peaked in mid-late April and steadily declined, with just 6,188 shots being administered on July 21st - just 13% of the peak rate.

A [variety of factors](#) are contributing to low vaccination rates in the state, including a lack of information about just how safe the shots are amid reports of blood clots and other health issues arising on the one hand, and confusion about whether health insurance is necessary to get the shot or if one's insurance plan will cover the cost. [According to WBRC](#), 10% of Alabamians don't have health insurance.

To be clear, the COVID-19 vaccine is free for all Americans.

US President Joe Biden [announced on Friday](#) that \$2.4 million would be distributed among 50 rural health clinics in Alabama to help them combat disinformation about vaccines.

In China, which has nearly five times the population to vaccinate than the US, officials have tried some novel [carrot-and-stick tactics](#) to convince citizens to come in for their vaccine shots,

including offering free ice cream and groceries, holding community "sharing sessions" where people who've gotten their shots tell the unvaccinated about their experience, and employers requiring staff to be vaccinated before returning to work. Hesitancy in China is, ironically enough, a product of the incredible effectiveness with which the Chinese government eliminated the COVID-19 outbreak there, causing many Chinese to be dismissive of the disease's dangers. In the US, too, officials have [employed incentives](#) to get folks to vaccination sites, including free taxi rides, coupons for various stores, and paid time off to go and get the shot.

According to the CDC, more than 83% of COVID-19 cases in the US are of the Delta variant, which is highly transmissible and has the ability to infect some people who are fully vaccinated, albeit with blunted symptoms compared to unvaccinated people.

Last week, CDC Director [Rochelle Walensky warned](#) the US was entering a "pandemic of the unvaccinated". "We are seeing outbreaks of cases in parts of the country that have low vaccination coverage because unvaccinated people are at risk".

Ivey told the media Friday she wanted to be "crystal clear about this issue".

"The new cases in COVID are because of unvaccinated folks. Almost 100% of the new hospitalisations are unvaccinated folks. And the deaths, certainly, are occurring with unvaccinated folks", she said. "These folks are choosing a horrible lifestyle of self-inflicted pain. We've got to get folks to take the shot, the vaccine is the greatest weapon we have to fight COVID, there is no question about that, the data proves it. I've taken the shot back in December, both shots, and it's just the thing to do. So the unvaccinated is who we need to focus on".

"It's their job to take care of themselves and us as well, we can't do that for them, all we can do is everybody take the shot themselves, so encourage others to do likewise".

Ivey was among the first state governors to [eliminate a statewide](#) mask mandate this past spring, pulling nearly all the state restrictions in April and urging people to use "common sense". It's part of a pattern of Republican governors in [states like Texas](#) and [Florida who rushed](#) to eliminate health mandates by positing them as infractions of citizens' "freedom".

'This Loss Will Save More Lives'

Alabama health officials seem similarly exasperated, with one doctor, Brytney Cobia of Grandview Medical Centre in Birmingham, saying in a Facebook post last weekend that so many of her patients don't appreciate the necessity of the vaccine until they're already in hospital with COVID-19.

"I'm admitting young healthy people to the hospital with very serious COVID infections", she wrote. "One of the last things they do before they're intubated is beg me for the vaccine. I hold their hand and tell them that I'm sorry, but it's too late".

Cobia also spoke of the denialism about the pandemic, with many families having its veracity thrust upon them by the death of a loved one from the virus.

"They cry. And they tell me they didn't know. They thought it was a hoax. They thought it was political. They thought because they had a certain blood type or a certain skin colour they wouldn't get as sick. They thought it was 'just the flu'. But they were wrong. And they wish they could go back. But they can't", Cobia said. "So they thank me and they go get the vaccine. And I go back to my office, write their death note, and say a small prayer that this loss will save more lives".

More than 11,400 Alabamians have died of COVID-19.

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'Let Cuba Live!' Activists Take Out Full-Page NYT Ad Asking Biden to Drop 243 Trump-Era Sanctions
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the wake of protests in Cuba and the US both for and against the socialist government in Cuba, progressives from around the world published a letter in the New York Times urging US President Joe Biden to undo the range of sanctions imposed on the country by his predecessor, Donald Trump, and "let Cuba live!"

"It is time to take a new path forward in US-Cuban relations. We, the undersigned, are making this urgent, public appeal to you to reject the cruel policies put into place by the Trump White House that have created so much suffering among the Cuban people," the [letter to Biden says](#). "Cuba – a country of eleven million people – is living through a difficult crisis due to the growing scarcity of food and medicine. Recent protests have drawn the world's attention to this. While the Covid-19 pandemic has proven challenging for all countries, it has been even more so for a small island under the heavy weight of an economic embargo," it continues.

"We find it unconscionable, especially during a pandemic, to intentionally block remittances and Cuba's use of global financial institutions, given that access to dollars is necessary for the importation of food and medicine."

"'We stand with the Cuban people,' you [wrote on July 12](#)," the letter notes. "If that is the case, we ask you to immediately sign an executive order and annul Trump's 243 'coercive measures.'"

"There is no reason to maintain the Cold War politics that required the US to treat Cuba as an existential enemy rather than a neighbor. Instead of maintaining the path set by Trump in his efforts to undo President Obama's opening to Cuba, we call on you to move forward. Resume the opening and begin the process of ending the embargo. Ending the severe shortages in food and medicine must be the top priority," the letter says.

The letter was signed by more than 400 activists, intellectuals, and organizers from around the world and took up two full pages in the US' "newspaper of record", which distributes about 375,000 print copies daily.

Some of the most prominent signatories include former UK Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn; former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa; actors Emma Thompson, Danny Glover, and Mark Ruffalo; former Brazilian President Lula da Silva; rapper Noname; former Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein; the Black Lives Matter Global Network; and former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis.

The ad was paid for by the People's Forum in New York City, and the letter was organized in conjunction with women's peace group Code Pink and the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) Coalition.

Projections and Marches

Accompanying the letter was a huge projection on a building in New York's Times Square on Thursday evening, also organized by The People's Forum. The projection included slides that

said “Let Cuba live,” “Stand with the people of Cuba? Unblock them!” “stop blocking food and medicine from the people of Cuba,” and “Cuba yes, blockade no” in Spanish.

Both the projection and the letter caught the attention of the Cuban government, with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez noting it on Twitter and Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel thanking those behind it for “this beautiful hug to the Cuban people in the heart of New York.” Similarly, on Sunday a group of Cuban-Americans against the blockade are expected to complete a 1,300-mile trek from Miami to Washington, DC, bringing their message to Biden’s front door. They are being led by Carlos Lazo, a Cuban-American veteran of the Iraq War who in 1991 came to the US from Cuba on a raft across the Straits of Florida.

[Lazo told Sputnik](#) recently that along the way, he is “contacting and talking to every American that we can” to teach them about Cuba and the damage caused by the US embargo.”

“The embargo was established with intent of overthrowing the Cuban government,” he explained, “but all the measures implemented by the embargo really hurt innocent Cuban people. I have seen that for so many years.”

Biden Clamps Down After Protests

The letter stands in stark contrast to what US President Joe Biden has actually done since protests broke out in several Cuban cities on July 11 over new restrictions created by a worsening COVID-19 pandemic and shortages in fuel and medical equipment on the island. Many of the protests in Cuba itself were not anti-government, but as Sputnik reported, there was a [concerted effort across social](#) and news media to portray them as the opening stages of a popular revolution. Taking cues from the media and from right-wing protesters in Miami and Washington, DC, who demanded harsher actions against the socialist government in Cuba, Biden announced new sanctions on Wednesday.

In 2015, late in then-US President Barack Obama’s second presidential term, the US relaxed some of its restrictions against Cuba and moved toward normalising relations with the country, including removing Cuba from the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism and easing travel and trade with the island. However, many of the heavy restrictions put in place shortly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution remained.

In June 2017, Trump reversed Obama’s “thaw” and not only returned the removed sanctions but [added hundreds](#) of new ones, including enforcing all aspects of the [Helms-Burton Act](#), allowing people to sue in US courts for damages if their property was seized by the Cuban government. The lawsuits can target both Cubans and foreign companies that do business on the island.

Restrictions were increased even further in 2019, after the US launched a failed attempt to overthrow Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by backing opposition legislator Juan Guaido, who claimed to be the country’s interim leader. Long-standing trade deals between the two nations saw medical aid to Venezuela and [gas sales to Cuba](#) shrink, causing shortages in both nations.

The vast majority of the world stands against the US blockade, which has affected the lives of every Cuban by causing acute shortages of basic necessities. Every year since 1992, the United Nations has voted overwhelmingly to condemn the blockade. On 23 June 2021, [the latest vote](#) saw 184 nations vote against the blockade, with just the United States and Israel voting in support of it.

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Trump Ally Thomas Barrack, Indicted Over Illegal UAE Lobbying, Reaches Bail Deal With Prosecutors
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US Department of Justice announced earlier this week that the longtime Trump ally had been taken into custody for violating foreign lobbying laws. The agency's investigation had been ongoing for at least two years.

A bail agreement for Thomas Barrack, a longtime confidant to former US President Donald Trump who is accused of violating foreign lobbying laws, was reached on Friday, effectively paving the way for the billionaire businessman's looming release from custody.

Barrack's Friday court hearing in Los Angeles, California, concluded that the Trump ally could be released from custody while he awaits trial on federal charges that include illegally acting as a foreign agent, obstruction of justice and making false statements to federal agents.

The obstruction and false statement charges stem from a June 2019 interview that Barrack had with federal investigators.

US prosecutors have requested that Barrack be fitted with an ankle bracelet, allowing federal agents to track his travels until at least the next scheduled court date. The bail package included a \$250 million bond secured by \$5 million in cash.

Barrack has been jailed since his [Tuesday arrest](#) in the Golden State, specifically in Los Angeles. US prosecutors had been arguing in favor of holding off on a bail agreement for Barrack over concerns that he could flee, as he holds Lebanese citizenship and owns a private jet.

A [release](#) issued by the US Department of Justice revealed that the 74-year-old founder of private equity firm Colony Capital had come under investigation after officials were tipped off to Barrack's efforts to illegally lobby on behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) between April 2016 and April 2018.

At the time, while also serving as a confidant for the former president, Barrack had also taken on the role of chairman for Trump's 2017 inaugural funds.

Evidence outlined in a [seven-count indictment](#) states that Barrack had been working with UAE citizen Rashid Sultan Rashid Al Malik Alshahhi and Colorado resident Matthew Grimes to advance UAE interests during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and throughout the Trump White House until April 2018.

All three individuals are facing illegal foreign lobbying charges.

US prosecutors have also reached a deal with Grimes, according to [CNBC](#), which noted that Barrack and Grimes are expected to be arraigned on July 26 in Brooklyn, New York, where the indictment was originally filed. Alshahhi remains at-large.

News of Barrack's bail agreement came moments after reports surfaced detailing that a company backed by the billionaire had informed the US Securities and Exchange Commission that it would be abandoning a push to go public after the investor was hit with federal charges.

The firm, known as the Falcon Peak Acquisition Corp, had first applied for an initial public offering of stock in March.

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'Authoritarian Reign': House Freedom Caucus Urges McCarthy to Oust 'Intolerable' Pelosi
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) recently ushered in a chorus of criticism from the chamber's Republicans after opting to bar Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Jim Banks (R-IN) from serving on the Capitol riot select committee. The GOP officials had been denied the congressional panel over their "antics" following the 6 January violence.

The House Freedom Caucus has called on US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) to force a vote to oust House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) from her post after she vetoed two Republican picks for the Capitol riot select committee, a letter addressed to the Republican official revealed on Friday.

The conservative group's letter specifically called for a privileged motion to be called by July 31 "to vacate the chair and end Nancy Pelosi's authoritarian reign as speaker of the House", effectively laying down a new foundation to bolster partisan tensions even further.

"Speaker Pelosi's tenure is destroying the House of Representatives and our ability to faithfully represent the people we are here to serve," reads the letter, adding that the congressional leader has "championed unconstitutional changes like allowing proxy voting and insulting security measures like metal detectors for members coming to the floor to vote".

"That abuse cannot go unchecked," officials underscored.

And then came the straw that broke the camel's back: Pelosi's decision to prohibit Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Jim Banks (R-IN) from sitting on the 6 January select committee.

The House Freedom Caucus described Pelosi's move to reject two of the five Republican appointments as "intolerable," noting that the decision further highlighted the Democrat leader "has no interest in representative democracy, let alone protecting institutional norms."

Earlier, Pelosi [explained](#) to reporters that past statements made by Jordan and Banks "made it ridiculous" to have them serve on a congressional panel "seeking the truth" about the January storming of the US Capitol.

"When statements are ridiculous and fall into the realm of, 'You must be kidding,' there's no way that they're going to be on the committee," Pelosi added.

Also cited in the letter was the [February decision](#) to strip Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) of her committee assignments over past incendiary comments and support of violence against her Democratic counterparts. At the time, the resolution came down 230 to 199, with 11 Republicans crossing the aisle.

"Republicans, under your leadership, must show the American people that we will act to protect our ability to represent their interests," the group concluded in their letter to McCarthy.

Although the Republican initiative is slated to be quickly shot down in the Democrat-controlled chamber, the one-page letter will inevitably serve as a test for McCarthy as he will likely need the group's backing to secure a potential House speaker post in 2022.

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Lebanon's Water System Has 'Weeks' Left Before Total Collapse, UN Warns
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Taking into consideration Lebanon's crushing economic crisis, the World Bank recently labelled the nation's financial meltdown as one of the worst in modern history, with its currency having lost more than 90% of its value.

Lebanon has only a handful of weeks to improve the functioning of its public water system and avert a total collapse, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed in a dire warning issued on Friday.

The United Nations agency detailed in its [recent release](#) that the Lebanese Republic's water system will likely begin to "gradually cease" in the next four to six weeks, effectively placing more than four million people at an "immediate risk" of not being able to have safe water supplies if the situation is not corrected soon.

Yukie Mokuo, who serves as the UNICEF representative in Lebanon, explained in a statement accompanying the release that the looming setback is being caused by the raging economic crisis ravaging the nation. She specifically cited the collapse of the country's power grid, fuel costs, and "dollarised maintenance costs" as the root cause of the water sector's nearing collapse.

A shortage in supplies such as chlorine and spare parts, as well as system setbacks are also to blame as the insufficiency is giving way to some 40% of water loss. "Blackouts and an intermittent power supply are placing water systems under pressure, interrupting the treatment, pumping, and distribution of water", the group outlined.

"A loss of access to the public water supply could force households to make extremely difficult decisions regarding their basic water, sanitation, and hygiene needs", Mokuo stated, underscoring that "unless urgent action is taken, hospitals, schools, and essential public facilities will be unable to function".

"Hygiene would be compromised, and Lebanon would see an increase in diseases. Women and adolescent girls would face particular challenges to their personal hygiene, protection, and dignity without access to safe sanitation", she continued.

Citing data collected in May and June, UNICEF has stated that over 70% of individuals living in Lebanon are either between "highly critical" or "critical" levels of being affected by the development.

It was also noted that the collapse would prompt the costs of water to "skyrocket by 200%" when locals seek out alternative measures from private suppliers, a cost that would be difficult to cover for many individuals.

While the financial group acknowledged that such an economic standing is typically caused by "conflicts or wars", it concluded that Lebanon's current standing is the result of a lack of political consensus over effective policies.

The UNICEF warning follows former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri recently renouncing his mandate to form a government after enduring nine months of failed negotiations to form a cabinet. Hariri was tasked with the job about two months after the [devastating explosion](#) in the Port of Beirut killed hundreds and levelled a huge portion of the capital.

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Whistleblower Facing 9 Years in Prison Says Guilt Over Drone Strikes Forced Leak of Classified Intel

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The former US Air Force analyst pleaded guilty to espionage charges in April, and is presently facing nine years behind bars for leaking classified information about the US' controversial drone program. He is expected to be sentenced on Tuesday.

Whistleblower Daniel Hale recently revealed that it was his own gnawing guilty conscience that prompted him to disclose classified information about the US' lethal drone operations to a journalist.

In an 11-page [handwritten letter](#) to US District Judge Liam O'Grady, Hale outlines the effects his military service had on him while also detailing the events that eventually led him to reach out to a trusted reporter and leak classified intelligence.

"It is more accurate to say that [military service] irreversibly transformed my identity as an American. Having forever altered the thread of my life's story, weaved into the fabric of our nation's history," Hale writes before going on to detail his deployment in 2012 to Afghanistan.

"Notwithstanding, in 2012, a full year after the demise of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, I was a part of killing misguided young men who were but mere children on the day of 9/11.

Nevertheless, in spite of my better instincts, I continued to follow orders and obey my command for fear of repercussion."

"Yet, all the while, becoming increasingly aware that the war had very little to do with preventing terror from coming into the United States and a lot more to do with protecting the profits of weapons manufacturers and so-called defense contractors. The evidence of this fact was laid bare all around me," he continued, recalling how "contract mercenaries outnumbered uniform-wearing soldiers 2-to-1 and earned as much as 10 times their salary".

Although Hale eventually parted ways with the US Air Force and the drone program he was initially assigned to, and even became an outspoken critic of the drone strikes, he wound up right back in a defense position as a contractor assigned to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

As his old feelings of guilt remained a constant companion, they soon forced him to join the growing numbers of American whistleblowers after he found himself invited to watch "archived footage of past drone strikes" with his new co-workers.

"Such bonding ceremonies around a computer to watch so-called 'war porn' had not been new to me. I partook in them all the time while deployed to Afghanistan. But on that day, years after the fact, my new friends gaped and sneered, just as my old ones had, at the sight of faceless men in the final moments of their lives," he recalled. "I sat by watching too; said nothing and felt my heart breaking into pieces."

"Left to decide whether to act, I only could do that which I ought to do before God and my own conscience. The answer came to me, that to stop the cycle of violence, I ought to sacrifice my own life and not that of another person," he explained.

"So, I contacted an investigative reporter, with whom I had had an established prior relationship, and told him that I had something the American people needed to know."

The documents that Hale went on to leak highlighted that the American drone program [was not as precise](#) as the US government had claimed, especially in regards to avoiding civilian deaths, a fact he highlighted in the letter.

Hale [pleaded guilty](#) in early April to one count of violating the 1917 Espionage Act. At the time, Jesselyn Radack, a whistleblower who also happens to be Hale's lawyer, relayed to the media that Hale agreed to plead guilty as he "would not have received a fair trial because the arcane Espionage Act does not allow for a public interest defense".

Hale's sentencing is expected to take place at the US District Court in Alexandria, Virginia on July 27. US prosecutors have pushed for Hale to be sentenced for at least nine years.

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House Oversight Republicans Raise Concerns of White House Colluding With Big Tech to Censor Speech

by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued the Biden Administration's first advisory earlier this month, warning Americans about the "urgent threat of health misinformation" and its impact on the US' overall response to COVID-19. At the time, Murthy urged social media companies to ramp up their ability to combat the spread of misinformation.

Republican members of the House Oversight Committee have penned a letter to the Surgeon General, demanding he hand over all documents and communications related to the "Biden Administration's efforts to censor medical information and opinions on social media".

The letter, organised by Reps. Bob Gibbs (R-OH), Byron Donalds (R-FL) and James Comer (R-KY), came as a strong rebuke to the [Surgeon General's July 15 advisory](#) on the "threat of health misinformation."

"The recurring themes: censorship and division," House Oversight Republicans wrote. "You suggest American families are lying to each other, children should censor their classmates, journalists be the gatekeepers of fact and censor views that do not conform with the latest in elite consensus, and Big Tech be the arbiter of credibility and suppress debate and discussion."

The GOP lawmakers also raised concerns that the White House may be "colluding with Big Tech", citing White House Press Secretary Jen [Psaki's recent announcement](#) that the White House would be flagging "problematic posts" on Facebook.

"It is clear that the Biden Administration's goal is to actively censor the American people," House Oversight Republicans declared. "This is particularly concerning considering Big Tech's collusion with the science community to suppress the theory COVID-19 originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology — a theory the Biden Administration recently admitted is likely."

Per the letter, the Surgeon General has until 6 August to provide the GOP lawmakers with an array of communications, including all communications related to his advisory on health misinformation.

"It should concern every American of every political stripe that Big Government is teaming up with Big Tech to merge into Big Brother," Gibbs said in a statement [provided to Fox News](#). Donalds also commented on their oversight effort against censorship, telling the outlet that Americans should have "unfettered information and make decisions for themselves".

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Researchers Say High Coffee Consumption Linked to Increased Risk for Dementia, Smaller Brains

by [Evan Craighead](#)

A study published last month in the journal BMC Public Health found that consuming three to four cups of coffee a day reduces one's risk of developing, and dying from chronic liver disease. While coffee has been proven to be beneficial in moderation, new research suggests there is a fine line between enjoying and abusing the beverage.

Individuals who consume more than six cups of coffee a day face an increased risk of dementia and smaller total brain volumes, according to a new study from the University of South Australia (UniSA).

To arrive at this conclusion, researchers led by UniSA Phd candidate Kitty Pham assessed the effects of coffee on the brains of some 17,702 individuals, aged 37 to 73 years old, and found that those who consumed more than six cups of coffee a day had a 53% increased risk of being diagnosed with dementia.

Participant data was pulled from the UK Biobank, a large long-term biobank study.

With the global consumption of coffee being around nine billion kilograms a year, it is imperative that people understand the "potential health implications" of coffee, [Pham emphasized in a UniSA release](#).

"This is the most extensive investigation into the connections between coffee, brain volume measurements, the risks of dementia, and the risks of stroke – it's also the largest study to consider volumetric brain imaging data and a wide range of confounding factors," she added. Approximately 50 million people have been diagnosed with dementia around the world, according to a World Health Organisation [\(WHO\) estimate](#). The syndrome is a degenerative

condition that impacts one's memory, behavior, thinking and even the ability to perform everyday tasks.

A stroke occurs when the blood supply to a part of one's brain becomes interrupted, preventing brain tissue from getting the necessary oxygen and nutrients. Globally, one in four adults aged 25 and up will have a stroke in their life, and around 13.7 million individuals will likely have their first stroke this year, [according to the World Stroke Organisation](#).

"Accounting for all possible permutations, we consistently found that higher coffee consumption was significantly associated with reduced brain volume – essentially, drinking more than six cups of coffee a day may be putting you at risk of brain diseases such as dementia and stroke," Pham detailed.

This research comes shortly after [another study utilized the UK Biobank](#) and determined that those who drink any amount of coffee are at a lower risk for developing and dying from chronic liver disease. Additionally, it found that three to four cups of coffee a day should be one's limit, as there is no additional benefit from drinking more.

Professor Elina Hyppönen, senior investigator and Director of UniSA's Australian Centre for Precision Health, asserted that knowledge of these potential health risks should help people make more informed decisions on what coffee moderation should look like.

"This research provides vital insights about heavy coffee consumption and brain health, but as with many things in life, moderation is the key," Hyppönen said. "Typical daily coffee consumption is somewhere between one and two standard cups of coffee. Of course, while unit measures can vary, a couple of cups of coffee a day is generally fine."

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Bezos' Space Wings Clipped After FAA Sets New Astronaut Standards on Blue Origin Launch Date

by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Tuesday, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos became the second billionaire to travel to space via a privately-owned spacecraft. During the 10-minute trip, Bezos, his brother, an 18-year-old boy from the Netherlands and an 82-year-old aviation enthusiast reached an altitude of around 66 miles (106 kilometres) with Blue Origin's fully-automated capsule.

While Bezos said his Tuesday spaceflight was the "best day ever", the monumental moment came alongside an unexpected order from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on new requirements for the Commercial Space Astronaut Wings Program.

Previously, an individual qualified for their Commercial Space Astronaut Wings if they "demonstrate flight beyond 50 statute miles above the surface of the Earth as flight crew on an FAA-licensed or permitted launch reentry vehicle."

[Per the order, effective July 20](#), the recipient will also be required to demonstrate "activities during flight that were essential to public safety" or contribute "to human space flight safety."

While the Blue Origin launch satisfied the FAA's altitude requirement, the capsule was fully automated, leaving no tasks for the passengers.

It is worth noting that the winged pins given to Bezos and others after the flight were supplied by Blue Origin.

Despite Bezos and company missing out on the new requirements for their Commercial Space Astronaut Wings, it remains possible that they could receive an honorary award.

"There could be individuals whose contribution to commercial human space flight merits special recognition," the updated policy read, highlighting that the Associate Administrator for Commercial Space Transportation would bestow the honor on "individuals who demonstrated extraordinary contribution or beneficial service to the commercial human space flight industry".

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Biden to Announce Support for People With Long-Term COVID-19 Symptoms - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's administration is set to announce a number of support measures for those affected with long-term symptoms of COVID-19, the White House announced on Monday.

"Today the Administration is ... releasing a package of guidance and resources to support individuals experiencing the long-term symptoms of COVID-19 or 'Post- Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC),' known commonly as 'long COVID,'" the statement said. In particular, the Biden administration released guidance explaining that long COVID-19 can qualify as a disability under a number of Federal civil rights laws, and children with long COVID-19 symptoms may qualify as children with disabilities.

The administration also provided resources on disability support services and resources that could help people if they now need assistance.

"These resources can provide information about what is available locally; help people connect to services, such as transportation and personal care attendants; help arrange reasonable accommodations and access vaccinations; and more," it said.

The number of COVID-19 cases in the United States has reached nearly 34.5 million, with more than 610,000 dead, according to the data from the John Hopkins University. Meanwhile, the country has already seen over 340 million doses of vaccine administered.

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ANALYSIS - New Haiti Prime Minister Unlikely to Bring Unity Amid Legitimacy Crisis, Foreign Meddling

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry will likely fail to build a political consensus because he lacks legitimacy after being tapped to lead by foreign powers, analysts told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, Henry was formally sworn in to assume his role as Haiti's prime minister, a position he was appointed to two days before President Jovenel Moise was assassinated.

Moise was assassinated earlier in July by armed gunmen that included several Colombian nationals with US military training. A total of 26 individuals have been detained in connection with the plot.

Even Moise's funeral on Friday was not safe from the instability, which was interrupted by gunfire that prompted the US delegation to quickly leave the scene.

LACK OF LEGITIMACY / FOREIGN MEDDLING

US officials have repeatedly called for Haitian leaders to bring the country together in the wake of the assassination. On Thursday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call with Henry stressed the necessity for the unity government to reach out to political and civil society groups to achieve a broad consensus.

"We're in for a lot more instability because the government doesn't have any legitimacy," former Organization of American States (OAS) translator Serge Bellegarde told Sputnik.

OAS, Bellegarde noted, also called for a unity government from different sectors in the wake of the assassination that rocked the island nation of 11 million and produced intense in-fighting among a number of politicians and political groups.

"This is a red herring," Bellegarde said. "They rushed to congratulate a new government but for those who do not know, this is not a unity government. This is not a consensus government because not all political representatives are in this government."

Moise before he was killed was the center of controversy and had become widely unpopular. He removed all of the country's mayors and refused to allow for a new parliament to be voted in and seated. Moise also arrested and forcibly retired Supreme Court justices and ruled by decree beginning in January 2020.

University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Associate Professor Jemima Pierre told Sputnik the new government's legitimacy is thrust into further question given forces outside of Haiti worked behind the scenes to engineer who would replace the assassinated Moise. Tops amongst these being the CORE group, which is composed of representatives from the US, EU, OAS, and UN, she said.

"The Biden administration sent down a delegation and the CORE group and said Ariel Henry will be president and the State Department said a new government would be named. They decided," said Pierre, a Haitian scholar and sociocultural anthropologist. "Blinken announced that there's a unity government, the State Department had already issued a statement and civil society was ignored. This is a continuation of imperialism."

Henry was appointed by a man, Moise, "who had no mandate," Pierre said. Henry, she added, is tied to USAID and the International Republican Institute. He is also a member of the Council of Sages - a US-appointed unelected group of prominent Haitian elites who supported the 2004 coup d'etat that deposed exiled Haitian President Jean Bertrand-Aristide.

Meanwhile, both Pierre and Bellegarde said a gathering of at least 200 representatives of civil society organizations, political parties, peasant groups, among other entities, were looking to implement a solution for Haiti but were ignored.

"Haiti is a laboratory for imperialism. They work out all their stuff there," said Pierre, who was born in Haiti and lives in the US. "They create dissension and destroy states. They destroyed Somalia as a state. This is the perfect lab for seeing how imperialists maintain power, effect regime change. This is the depth of imperialist machinations. The US has created absolute chaos. This is the moment to end Pan-European democracy."

NO EASY ANSWERS

Theories about the assassination continue to spread like brush fires in Haiti, with some doubting the official narrative of what happened.

"This was an inside job. I think people running the investigation are involved. They are using the Colombians as scapegoats," Pierre said. "Two families stood to lose contracts. I think this is infighting among the elite. I think it was a coup within the party and they thought they could get away with it. The head of the president's security force of 20 is in custody. No one was hit. It was an inside job that the US is trying to cover up."

Bellegarde said the plot has many levels and a host of suspects ranging from local police to former top officials.

"The chief of police is considered a suspect by people in the streets. He went to Cap Haitien to survey where the funeral is going to be and the residents ran him out of town. There is a lot of suspicion," said Bellegarde. "The former foreign minister Claude Joseph was named by a Colombian newspaper as a suspect in planning the assassination. It's a complex investigation. The FBI is helping and the main witness is Mrs. Moise who is back in Haiti under very heavy guard."

The Haiti Moise presided over was a country of deep political, racial, caste and social divisions, one often riven by political squabbling and bickering, gang violence and widespread protests. The island nation's myriad challenges include a moribund economy, inadequate health care, droughts, food shortages and an alarmingly high level of violence.

In 2019, DePaul University Economics Professor Dr. Ludovic Comeau said Haiti's capital income is \$350, about half of the country's roads are unpaved, and unemployment is estimated at about 80 percent.

Yet, despite this track record, Bellegarde said the deification of Moise has begun.

"His life ended violently. There is mourning across the country even though he was so unpopular. But people around Moise are pushing to rehabilitate him, they are calling him the greatest president ever and comparing him to Dessalines," he said. "They have even suggested that his wife run for president. This is all well calculated. They are doing this to work on people's emotions even though he was so unpopular."

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RPT - Regional Mechanism Should Be Used to Contain Taliban if Kabul Falls - Ex-Indian Diplomat

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The international community should exploit regional dialogue formats to ensure the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) do not interfere in the affairs of Afghanistan's neighbors if the insurgent group eventually captures Kabul, former Indian diplomat M. K. Bhadrakumar told Sputnik.

In a phone call on Friday, US President Joe Biden and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani agreed the Taliban's current offensive contradicts the movement's claim to support a negotiated settlement. This comes a day after the Taliban said it controls 90% of Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

"There is no alternative but to work with the Taliban in the larger interests of regional security and stability. The effort should be to encourage the Taliban to fulfill its assurances regarding non-interference in the neighboring countries' affairs and disallowing terrorist activities from Afghan soil," Bhadrakumar said. "They [the Taliban] are pragmatic."

The US-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (QUAD-2) format, Bhadrakumar added, already provides a platform to "recalibrate in the event of a Taliban takeover."

Afghanistan has witnessed a spike in violence as the Taliban stepped up military activities after international troops began withdrawing from the country in May, as part of the US-Taliban agreement signed in Doha in February 2020. Fearing attacks and fleeing clashes, Afghan civilians and military recently crossed the border into Tajikistan.

Earlier this week, Moscow's envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said Russian military drills in Tajikistan send a signal to Central Asian partners that everything is in order as Taliban made advances threatening neighboring states. Kabulov also said Russia's 201st military base in Tajikistan will be on stand-by but will not take any proactive steps.

On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed the belief that the Moscow format on Afghanistan conflict resolution is the most effective one for conducting peace talks.

Bhadrakumar served as a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service for three decades, half of which was devoted to assignments on the territories of the former Soviet Union and to Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

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"I can just confirm that he was deported on July 21," the ICE official said on Friday.

There is no other information on the matter, the official added.

Kryuchkov pleaded guilty to an attempted cyberattack on Tesla's computer network. He was arrested in August 2020 after arriving in the United States on a tourist visa in July. Tesla founder Elon Musk said the target of the cyberattack was his electric vehicles manufacturing plant in the state of Nevada.

On May 24, Kriuchkov was sentenced to a term of ten months served.

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Biden, Ghani Agree Taliban Offensive Contradicts Negotiation Claims - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in a phone conversation agreed that the current offensive by the Taliban (banned in Russia) contradicts their claims to support peace talks, the White House said in a readout.

"President Biden and President Ghani agreed that the Taliban's current offensive is in direct contradiction to the movement's claim to support a negotiated settlement of the conflict," the release said on Friday. "They deplored the loss of innocent Afghan lives, including through continued targeted killings, as well as displacement of the civilian population, looting and burning of buildings, destruction of vital infrastructure, and damage to communication networks." Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday that about half of the 419 district centers in Afghanistan are under Taliban control, but they have not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals in the country.

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Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Ends Search for Remains in Surfside Collapse, Police Takeover

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Miami-Dade Fire Rescue is ending its search for remains in the rubble of the Surfside, Florida condo building collapse but police will take over the operation, the county mayor's office said in a press release.

"Today, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue is transitioning the search and recovery effort to the Miami-Dade Police Department," the release said on Friday. "The operation is ongoing, and MDPD is continuing to search the debris pile both for human remains and for personal items until they have completed a full additional search of the debris."

As of Friday evening, the release noted that the death count stands at 97 with one victim still unaccounted for.

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US, EU Welcome Recent Taliban Openness to Negotiate Mechanism for Representative Gov't.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States, European Union, NATO and several European states said in a joint statement that they welcome the Taliban movement's (banned in Russia) commitments and openness to negotiate with Kabul a mechanism for a representative government in Afghanistan.

"We welcome in particular the commitments made by the Taliban yesterday to inclusive governance, respecting human rights, including the rights of women and minorities, to abide by international law, including international humanitarian law, and to upholding counter terrorism commitments," the US-Europe Communiqué on Afghanistan and Peace Efforts said on Friday. The United States and its European partners also welcome the Taliban's openness to negotiate a mechanism for a representative government with the Afghan government's negotiation team, the communique said.

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US, EU Acknowledge Peace Process in Afghanistan Will Take Time, Call for Meaningful Talks

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States, European Union, NATO and other European states acknowledged in a joint statement that achieving a final settlement in Afghanistan will take time, but called on the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) and the Afghan government to engage in meaningful negotiations.

"We acknowledge that reaching a final political settlement, including on the Constitution, will likely take time," the US-Europe Communiqué on Afghanistan and Peace Efforts said on Friday. "We urge the two sides to agree on a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and on foundational principles for the future Afghan State and details of transitional governing arrangements until a final political settlement is reached."

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Biden Allocates Up to \$100Mln for Urgent Afghan Refugee and Migration Needs - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Up to \$100 million will be allocated for unexpected and urgent refugee needs among Afghan victims of conflict, including Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants to reside in the United States, US President Joe Biden said in a memorandum addressed to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

"I hereby determine... that it is important to furnish assistance under the MRAA (Migration and Refugee Assistance Act) in an amount of up to \$100 million from the United States Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Fund for the purpose of meeting unexpected urgent refugee and migration needs, victims of conflict, and other persons at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan, including applicants for Special Immigrant Visas," Biden said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA STRATEGIC STABILITY TALKS

- * The talks between Russia and the United States on strategic stability will be held on July 28 in Geneva, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.
- * US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will lead the US delegation during the Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia set to take place on July 28 in Geneva, the US Department of State said.

OLYMPIC GAMES OPENING CEREMONY IN TOKYO

- * Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka lit the Olympic cauldron at the XXXII Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo during the opening ceremony on Friday.
- * Japanese Emperor Naruhito has declared the XXXII Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo open.
- * A protest against holding Olympic Games is ongoing in Tokyo near a stadium during an opening ceremony of the event on Friday.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON AFGHANISTAN

- * Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said on Friday he had spoken by phone with US President Joe Biden, who pledged further support for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).
- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that there are no updates on the issue of removing the Taliban (outlawed in Russia) from the country's list of banned organizations.
- * Peskov said that there are no updates on the issue of the possibility to host negotiations on Afghanistan by Russia.
- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed the belief that the Moscow format on the Afghanistan conflict resolution is the most effective one for conducting peace talks.

STOCKS HIT RECORD HIGHS

- * Wall Street's Dow Jones Industrial Average on Friday hit an all-time high of 35,095 before closing at 35,061, up 238 points or 0.7 percent on the day.
- * The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, also hit a record high of 4,415 before settling up 1 percent at 4,410.

NOVEL CORONAVIRUS

- * The United Nations calls on all member states, including China, to fully cooperate with the World Health Organization amid Beijing's rejection of a further investigation into the origins of the COVID-19, UN deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said.
- * The European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Friday approved the use of Spikevax, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by US drugmaker Moderna, for children aged 12 to 17 years old.

CHINA HONG KONG-RELATED SANCTIONS

- * China said on Friday that it has imposed counter-sanctions on US individuals including former Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross in response to the United States imposed sanctions on Chinese officials with China's liaison office in Hong Kong.

* The Biden administration is undeterred after China imposed new sanctions on individuals and entities in the United States, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

INCIDENT AT HAITI PRESIDENT FUNERAL

* The United Nations is aware of reports of shots fired at demonstrators in Haiti who gathered outside the funeral procession of the late President Jovenel Moise, but the world body has not received any information about UN staff present there, deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

* The US delegation attending the funeral of assassinated Haitian President Jovenel Moise is safe and headed back to the United States after nearby gunfire cut short the event, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

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Dow Hits 35,000 First Time Ever As US Stock Indexes End Week at Record High

NEW YORK, July 23 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Dow Jones Industrial Average crossed 35,000 points the first time ever on Friday while other key US stock indexes hit record highs as well, rebounding strongly from an early plunge during the week.

The Dow, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, hit an all-time high of 35,095 before closing at 35,061, up 238 points or 0.7 percent on the day. For the week, the Dow rose 1.1 percent.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, also hit a record high of 4,415 before settling up 1 percent at 4,410. For the week, the S&P500 gained 2% on the week.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite peaked at 14,846 before finishing up 1 percent at 14,837. Nasdaq, which groups high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, was the outperformer of the week, surging almost 3 percent.

Strong earnings for the second quarter posted by most US companies also enthused Friday's rally, said analysts.

"Stock markets are ending the week on a positive note, with earnings continuing to surprise to the upside and Covid fears being brushed aside as the S&P and Nasdaq hit fresh record highs," Craig Erlam, analyst at New York-based broker OANDA, said. "Whether both of these things will continue, we'll see in the coming weeks, but for now investors are extremely enthused by what they've seen and optimistic about what's to come."

US stocks had a rude start to the week as worries about global growth amid a resurgence of coronavirus cases led to a broad sell-off across markets. All the three indexes fell about 2 percent or more on Monday, reacting to risk aversion.

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US Conducts Second Airstrike Against Al-Shabab Militants in Somalia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration conducted an airstrike against al-Shabab terrorist in the region in Somalia earlier on Friday, US Defense Department spokesperson Cindi King told Sputnik.

This is the second airstrike the US military has conducted in Somalia under the Biden administration. The first airstrike occurred on July 20 in support of Somali forces fighting al-Shabab militant in the region of Galkayo, Somalia.

"The Department of Defense can confirm that in coordination with the Federal Government of Somalia, US Africa Command forces conducted an airstrike against al-Shabab in the vicinity of Qeycad, Galmudug, Somalia today," King said in a statement. "There were no US forces accompanying Somali forces during this operation. US forces were conducting a remote advise and assist mission in support of designated Somali partner forces."

King said no additional information can be provided at this time due to operational security concerns.

Al-Shabab is a Somali-based Islamist insurgent group with links to al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia). The group has long been leading an insurgency against the Somalian federal government, staging numerous attacks in an effort to impose a radical version of Sharia law in the country.

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US Determines No Trade Action Needed on Vietnam Currency Issue - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has decided no trade action will be needed at this time over allegations that Vietnam had excessively intervened in foreign exchange markets to achieve favorable outcomes for its currency, the Office of US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a statement.

The US Trade Representative had expressed concerns over Vietnam's acts, policies and practices related to currency valuation in January. But in an update issued on Friday, the agency said an agreement between the Treasury Department and the State Bank of Vietnam provided "a satisfactory resolution of the matter subject to investigation, and accordingly ... no trade action is warranted at this time."

In its earlier statement at the beginning of the year, the US Trade Representative found "excessive foreign exchange market interventions and other related actions, taken in their totality" by Hanoi, that it said were "unreasonable enough" to burden or restrict US commerce. In the update, the US Trade Representative said the Treasury Department will work with Vietnam to ensure implementation of the agreement between the two parties and also examine the currency practices of other major trading partners of the United States.

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US, EU Call on Taliban to End Offensive, Engage in Peace Process - Joint Communiqué

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States, the European Union, individual European states and NATO are urging the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) to stop its military offensive in Afghanistan and engage in peace talks, the US-Europe Communiqué on Afghanistan and Peace Efforts said on Friday.

"We call on the Taliban to end their military offensive, and on both the Islamic Republic and the Taliban to engage meaningfully in the peace process," the joint communiqué, issued by the United States, European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom and NATO, said.

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US Hopes to Hold Next Strategic Dialogue With Kuwait Soon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States expects the next strategic dialogue with Kuwait to take place soon, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Daniel Benaïm told reporters on Friday.

"I am sure that the topic will come up and our governments are in constant cooperation and contact about the next dialogue that we hope will be soon," Benaïm said during a press conference.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to India and Kuwait on July 26-29 to discuss a range of issues with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior Kuwaiti officials, the State Department said earlier on Friday.

While in Kuwait, Blinken will meet with senior Kuwaiti officials to continue discussions on key bilateral matters, according to the State Department.

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Blinken to Discuss with Indian Officials Route to Stability in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to discuss ways to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan during talks with Indian officials in New Delhi next week, Acting Assistant Secretary Dean Thompson told reporters on Friday.

"We expect that all the countries in the region have a shared interest in a stable and secure Afghanistan going forward, and so we will certainly be looking at talking with our Indian partners about how we can work together to realize that goal, to find ways to bring the parties together and continue to pursue a negotiated settlement to end the longstanding war," Thompson said in response to a question about whether Afghanistan would be on the agenda.

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Blinken's Talks With Modi to Focus on Expanding Cybersecurity, Defense - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his upcoming meeting with India's Prime Minister Modi will discuss ways to boost cybersecurity and defense cooperation, Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Dean Thompson told reporters on Friday.

"In the Secretary's meetings with Prime Minister Modi and external Affairs Minister Jaishankar, we expect the discussions to focus on ways to further deepen our bilateral partnership which is very broad in scope as well as increase convergence on regional and global issues," Thompson

said. "Our bilateral discussions with our Indian partners will focus on expanding our security, Defense, cyber and counterterrorism cooperation."

The State Department earlier in the day announced that Blinken would will travel to India and Kuwait on July 26-29 and meet Modi on July 28 for talks on a range of issues.

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US Announces \$155Mln in Humanitarian Assistance for Iraq - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Iraq with \$155 million in humanitarian aid, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"The United States is pleased to announce nearly \$155 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Iraq as well as Iraqi refugees in the region and generous communities hosting them," Blinken said in a press release.

The funding will be used to provide Iraqis with shelter, essential healthcare, emergency food assistance, water, sanitation, and hygiene services, the release said.

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Pentagon Says Systems Made by China's Da Jiang Innovations 'Pose Potential Threats' to US

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department said on Friday that systems made by Chinese manufacturer Da Jiang Innovations (DJI) pose potential threats to US national security.

"The Department of Defense (DOD) position is that systems produced by Da Jiang Innovations (DJI) pose potential threats to national security," the Defense Department said in a press release. "Existing DOD policy and practices associated with the use of these systems by US government entities and forces working with US military services remain unchanged contrary to any written reports not approved for release by the DOD."

The Defense Department said that a recent report indicating that certain DJI drones had been approved by the US government for the procurement and use by several US agencies is inaccurate, and the release of that information was unauthorized.

The release noted that the Defense Department banned the use of all commercial off-the-shelf drones, regardless of who made them, due to cybersecurity concerns. In addition, Congress passed legislation banning US departments and agencies from purchasing and using drones made in China due to national security concerns as well.

The Defense Department would only purchase Chinese-made drones if it was conducting counter-drone surrogate testing and training or intelligence, electronic warfare, and information warfare operations, testing, analysis and training, the release said.

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US Haiti Delegation Returns Safely After Shooting at Moise's Funeral - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US delegation sent to Haiti to attend the funeral of assassinated President Jovenel Moise arrived safely back in the United States after being forced to leave because of gunfire near the event, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The Presidential Delegation to the funeral of President Moise is safe and accounted for, and those traveling from Washington, DC have arrived safely back in the United States," Sullivan said in a statement.

Members of the delegation included Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Jeff Fortenberry, UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, top Biden adviser for Latin America Juan Gonzales, and newly-appointed US Special Envoy to Haiti Daniel Foote.

Sullivan added in his statement that the US remains "deeply concerned" about the ongoing situation in Haiti and urged all parties to engage with one another peacefully. The US will continue providing assistance such as equipment, training, and investigative help to the Haitian government and police, he said.

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Blinken in Talks With Iraqi Counterpart Reaffirms US Support to Secure Iraq - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a meeting with Iraq's Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein in Washington reiterated that the United States remains committed to assisting Iraq in achieving a secure and stable future, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Iraqi Foreign Minister Dr. Fuad Hussein today on the margins of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, DC," Price said in a press release. "Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Hussein reviewed the Strategic Dialogue and reaffirmed the principles agreed upon by the two sides in the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA)...The Secretary reiterated that the United States remains committed to assisting the Government of Iraq to achieve a secure, stable, and prosperous future."

Blinken conveyed support for Iraq's anti-corruption and economic reform efforts, Price said.

On Thursday, US and Iraq defense officials met at the Pentagon to discuss the presence of US forces in Iraq. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Iraqi National Security Adviser Qassem al Araj participated in the meeting as well.

Media reported earlier this week that US President Joe Biden will meet with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi on Monday and the two are expected to announce plans for the United States to end its combat mission in Iraq and switch to an advisory role by the end of the year. There are currently some 2,500 US troops in Iraq and a drawdown is not expected as part of the new plan.

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US-Canada Critical Minerals Working Group to Meet on July 28 - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US-Canada working group on critical minerals will hold a meeting next week, US Ambassador to Ottawa Arnold Chacon said on Friday.

"The US-Canada critical minerals working group will meet next week in July 28," Chacon said at a Wilson Center event.

The ambassador stressed that the two governments must align on priorities and policies on search, development and innovation necessary to make North America competitive and secure in this vital sector.

The State Department said last week that the United States and Canada have advanced bilateral collaboration to strengthen the supply chain between both countries for critical minerals.

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US to Purchase 200Mln Pfizer COVID Vaccines for Booster Shots, Children - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US government will be purchasing an additional 200 million COVID vaccine doses from Pfizer in order to meet future needs such as booster shots and the vaccination of children, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said at a press conference on Friday.

"The federal government is exercising an option in its contract with Pfizer to purchase these 200 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine to be delivered between the fall of 2021 and the spring of 2022 to prepare for future vaccination needs, including vaccines for children under 12 and possible booster shots if studies show they are necessary," Psaki said in response to a question about the veracity of the purchase.

Psaki added that it is the job of the federal government to be prepared and flexible for future needs, and that they are purchasing the extra doses to ensure for any future contingencies. She said that they are unable to predict when or if the vaccine will be approved for children under 12, or if booster shots will be necessary.

Pfizer and BioNTech have now contracted to provide the US government with 500 million total doses of their vaccine. The companies also said in a statement on Friday that they plan on donating another 500 million doses for the US to distribute to poorer nations.

Receiving two doses of the Pfizer vaccine has shown to be 88% effective against the emerging delta variant of COVID in comparison to a 67% effectiveness of its AstraZeneca counterpart, according to a study published by the New England Journal of Medicine on Wednesday.

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Trump Ally Barrack Reaches Bail Deal With US Prosecutors - CNBC

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Thomas Barrack, the private equity investor charged with illegally lobbying his close friend ex-President Donald Trump on behalf of the United Arab Emirates, has reached a bail deal with US prosecutors, CNBC reported on Friday.

Barrack, 74, has been jailed since his arrest Tuesday in Los Angeles. He originally was due to have his bail hearing Monday, along with Thomas Grimes, a 27-year-old business associate of Barrack's, who is charged in the case. CNBC, however, reported that prosecutors agreed to a bail deal for Barrack and Grimes and that both are expected to be arraigned next Monday in Brooklyn federal court in New York.

Barrack was indicted Tuesday for illegal foreign lobbying on behalf of the UAE in connection with what prosecutors described as an effort to influence the Trump campaign in 2016 and the first year of his administration.

Prosecutors alleged that the lobbyist had pushed for policies that would benefit the UAE and at one point, talked to Trump about appointing himself as an ambassador to that country. Grimes has also been accused of undisclosed foreign lobbying.

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Payoneer Inc to Pay \$1.4Mln Fine for Sanctioned Payments to Crimea, Iran – Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) – The US-based online money transmitter Payoneer has agreed to pay a more than \$1.4 million to settle thousands of violations of US sanctions it committed by sending payments to Crimea, Iran, Syria and Sudan, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

“Payoneer agreed to remit \$1,400,301.40 to settle its potential civil liability for 2,260 apparent violations of multiple sanctions programs,” the Treasury said in a statement.

The company processed payments to Crimea, Iran, Sudan and Syria on multiple occasions, and also processed payments on behalf of sanctioned individuals, the Treasury added.

“The settlement amount reflects OFAC’s determination that 2,241 of Payoneer’s apparent violations were not voluntarily self-disclosed, 19 were voluntarily self-disclosed, and all transactions were non-egregious,” the Treasury said.

The transactions totaling \$802,117.36 took place between February 2013 and February 2018, it added.

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Deputy Secretary Sherman to Lead US Delegation at Talks With Russia Next Week - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will lead the US delegation during the Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia set to take place on July 28 in Geneva, the US Department of State said in a statement on Friday.

“Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman will travel to Geneva, Switzerland to lead the US delegation’s participation in a US-Russia bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue on July 28, 2021,” the statement said.

Sherman will be joined by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins, the statement added.

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Yellen Warns Congress of ‘Irreparable Harm’ if US Debt Limit Not Raised By August 1

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US debt will reach its allowable peak on August 1 and there will be “irreparable harm” if the limit is not raised, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned Congress on Friday.

“I am writing to inform you that beginning on Sunday, August 1, 2021, the outstanding debt of the United States will be at the statutory limit,” Yellen said in a letter addressed to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and copied to Republicans leaders in both Congress and the Senate.

Yellen's comment comes as Republican lawmakers signaled opposition to raising the debt ceiling.

The Treasury Secretary said increasing or suspending the debt limit does not increase government spending, nor does it authorize spending for future budget proposals.

"It simply allows Treasury to pay for previously enacted expenditures. The current level of debt reflects the cumulative effect of all prior spending and tax decisions, which have been made by Administrations and Congresses of both parties over time. Failure to meet those obligations would cause irreparable harm to the US economy and the livelihoods of all Americans."

Yellen reminded lawmakers on both sides of the aisle that even the threat of failing to meet the United States' debt obligations has caused detrimental impacts in the past, including the first-ever credit rating downgrade in US history in 2011.

"This is why no President or Treasury Secretary of either party has ever countenanced even the suggestion of a default on any obligation of the United States," she said.

On Wednesday, the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office said the US government will most likely run out of money between October and November unless the debt ceiling was raised.

The caution came after Senate Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said his party will not vote for a debt ceiling hike.

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US Cancels First Border Wall Contracts, Reviewing Others - Homeland Security Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Friday that the federal government has terminated two contracts to construct border wall on the US southern border with Mexico because it found they were unnecessary.

"Today, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is terminating two border barrier contracts in the Laredo Sector that are not necessary to address any life, safety, environmental, or other remediation requirements, as described in the DHS Border Wall Plan implementing President Biden's Proclamation," DHS said in a press release.

These are the first contracts terminated by the Biden administration and other contracts are being reviewed to determine if others are unnecessary as well, the release said.

The contracts canceled on Friday would have been for the addition of 31 miles of border wall on the US-Mexico border in south Texas, the release said.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott is in the process of using his authority to build additional border wall, but construction has not begun.

CBP data shows that Border Patrol agents apprehended 188,829 migrants on the US southern border in the month of June, bringing the total number of apprehensions in the region since October to 1.1 million.

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US 'Undeterred' by China's New Sanctions on American Individuals, Entities - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is undeterred after China imposed new sanctions on individuals and entities in the United States, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We are aware of course of the reports that the PRC [China] has imposed sanctions on several individuals and NGOs, including at least one official from the previous administration," Psaki told reporters. "We're undeterred by these actions and we remain fully committed to implementing all relevant US sanction authorities."

Beijing imposed Hong Kong-related sanctions on former Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, US-China Economic Security Review Commission Chair Carolyn Bartholomew; former staff director of the Congressional Executive Commission on China, Jonathan Stivers; Human Rights Watch's China Director Sophie Richardson; DoYun Kim at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs; and senior program manager of the International Republican Institute and the Hong Kong Democratic Council, Adam Joseph King.

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UN Urges China to Fully Cooperate With WHO on Probe Into COVID-19 Origins - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on all member states, including China, to fully cooperate with the World Health Organization (WHO) amid Beijing's rejection of a further investigation into the origins of the COVID-19, UN deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

"We implore all member states, including China, to cooperate fully with the World Health Organization, and if the World Health Organization believes it requires further information, we hope that they will all cooperate," Haq said.

On Thursday, China's National Health Commission rejected the WHO plan for a second phase of the investigation, claiming its criteria were "insulting" and heavily suggested the laboratory leak possibility.

On Saturday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the second study will include an audit of labs and research facilities in the area where the first cases of COVID-19 were registered in December 2019. The new study is part of a five-stage plan which the WHO put together to identify where did the coronavirus originate.

In March, the WHO published a report of the first fact-finding mission of its experts to Wuhan, where the world's first coronavirus outbreak occurred. Experts concluded that the leakage of the virus from a state-run laboratory in Wuhan was "extremely unlikely." They also said that there

was a high possibility that the virus was transmitted to humans from bats through another animal.

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US Delegation Safe and Heading Back to US After Gunfire at Moise Funeral - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US delegation attending the funeral of assassinated Haitian President Jovenel Moise is safe and headed back to the United States after nearby gunfire cut short the event, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"On our delegation in Haiti, the presidential delegation is safe and accounted for in light of the reported shootings outside of the funeral. They're on their way back to the United States," Psaki said during a press conference.

The delegation included US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, top Biden adviser for Latin America Juan Gonzales, US Special Envoy to Haiti Daniel Foote and US Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Jeff Fortenberry.

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Biden to Speak With Afghan President Ghani Later on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will be speaking with his Afghanistan counterpart Ashraf Ghani later on Friday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"The President and the administration supports the leadership of the Afghan people, including Ashraf Ghani, the [US] President was scheduled to speak with him today," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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UN Chief, His Deputy Have No Plans to Meet Tikhanovskaya Next Week - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and his deputy Amina Mohammed do not plan to meet Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya next week during her visit to New York, United Nations deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said during a press briefing on Friday.

"The Secretary-General will not be here next week, and the Deputy Secretary-General remains in Rome," Haq said when asked whether the officials intend to meet Tikhanovskaya. "We'll only be back to New York at the very end of the week."

Haq added he was not sure whether any other UN official has plans to meet with Tikhanovskaya.

Tikhanovskaya is visiting the United States and has already met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Under Secretary Victoria Nuland and State Department Counselor Derek Chollet as well as the Belarusian diaspora.

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UN Urges China to Fully Cooperate With WHO on Probe Into COVID Origins - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on all member states, including China, to fully cooperate with the World Health Organization amid Beijing's rejection of a further investigation into the origins of the COVID-19, UN deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

"We implore all member states, including China, to cooperate fully with the World Health Organization, and if the World Health Organization believes it requires further information, we hope that they will all cooperate," Haq said.

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UPDATE: Blinken to Meet With India, Kuwait Senior Officials on July 28 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to India and Kuwait on July 26-29 to discuss a range of issues with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior Kuwaiti officials, the State Department said on Friday.

"In New Delhi on July 28, Secretary Blinken will meet with External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss a wide range of issues including continued cooperation on COVID-19 response efforts, Indo-Pacific engagement, shared regional security interests, shared democratic values and addressing the climate crisis," the State Department said in a release. "Secretary Blinken will travel on July 28 to Kuwait City where he will meet with senior Kuwaiti officials to continue discussions of key bilateral issues that underscore the importance of our 60 years of diplomatic ties."

Blinken's visit will be the second high-profile visit of a member of the Biden's administration. Earlier this week, sources in the Indian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik that Blinken is expected to arrive in New Delhi on July 27 for a two-day visit. Afghan Army Chief Gen. Mohammed Ahmedzai will also arrive to India on July 27 for a three-day visit.

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UN Aware of Shots Fired Outside Haitian President Moise Funeral - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is aware of reports of shots fired at demonstrators in Haiti who gathered outside the funeral procession of the late President Jovenel Moise, but the world body has not received any information about UN staff present there, deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti Helen La Lime is attending the funeral. In addition, the US delegation at the funeral is led by Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield.

"We're aware of these reports and were checking up on them," Haq said. "I haven't been informed of any issues or problems with any of our UN staff in Haiti."

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Blinken Says Taliban Takeover Would Make Afghanistan 'Pariah State'

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan will turn into a pariah state if the Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) takes over the country, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview on Friday.

"We do have deep concerns about the actions the Taliban is taking indicating that it may be trying to take the country by force, but were that to happen, Afghanistan would be a pariah state," Blinken said. "It would not get the assistance that it's looking for and the Taliban says it wants - if it has any responsibility for the country. It would not get the support from the international community that it says it wants."

Blinken pointed out that the United States is actively engaged in diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan because the ongoing conflict has no military solution.

"We're sustaining our support through our embassy, through other embassies for the Afghan people, and at the same time we're working to make good on our commitment to those who helped us and put their lives on the line - interpreters, translators - they're benefiting from a program called Special Immigrant Visa programs that allow them to seek visas to come to the United States," he said. "We are moving very, very rapidly ahead with that program."

Afghanistan has witnessed an increase in violence as the Taliban stepped up military activities after international troops began withdrawing from the country in May.

On Thursday, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid told Sputnik the movement controls 90 percent of Afghanistan's borders, including with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran.

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US Government Sees No Response From Cuba Required to Ease Sanctions - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US government does not see any response from Cuba necessary for Washington to ease the sanctions it had imposed on the island nation, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview on Friday.

When asked whether Cuba is showing any signs of improvement in responding to what the United States has required to ease sanctions or not impose additional restrictive measures, Blinken said, "No. We haven't seen that kind of response."

Blinken pointed out that the Cuban government tends to double down in similar situations and the issue at question is not the United States but the Cuban people.

"I think one of the big mistakes the regime makes is to try to point the finger at the United States, saying we're responsible for these protests. We're not. These are the Cuban people. They are speaking up. They are standing - they're speaking out. They're standing up," he said.

The United States imposed a new round of sanctions on Cuba on Thursday, targeting the Cuban military and the interior ministry over the crackdown of recent protests earlier in July.

Some Cubans demonstrated in the streets amid the country's economic decline exacerbated by the novel coronavirus measures, and demanded free elections and improved economic conditions. The government deployed security forces across the country and halted communications, including the internet, while its supporters engaged in counter demonstrations.

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Canada to Admit Afghans Who Helped Its Defense Forces - Statement

TORONTO, July 23 (Sputnik) - The government of Canada is announcing a resettlement program for those who cooperate with its defense forces in Afghanistan amid threats to their lives emanating from the Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada said in a release on Friday.

"The Honourable Marco E. L. Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, the Honorable Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Honorable Harjit S. Sajjan, Minister of National Defense, today announced a special program to resettle the Afghans who were integral to Canada's efforts in Afghanistan," the release said. "In recognition of their service to Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is implementing special immigration measures that will offer a path to protection in Canada for those at risk due to their work."

Interpreters who worked with the Canadian armed forces, cooks, drivers, cleaners, construction workers, security guards and local staff employed at the Embassy of Canada to Afghanistan who can prove their "enduring relationship" with the government of Canada as well as their family members will be eligible for resettlement in Canada under the new program, the release said.

On July 16, the Canadian Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said that the government was working to assist Afghan interpreters who are facing imminent danger as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan nears end while Canada was out of the Afghan war in 2014.

The faith of those who assisted the allied forces in Afghanistan over the course of the last two decades is also a hot topic in the US where the initial group of 2,500 will soon be housed at the military bases, while up to 35,000 of Afghan interpreters and their family members will be settled at US bases in Kuwait and Qatar.

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NPT Review Conference Rescheduled to Take Place in January 2022 - President

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - President-designate of the 2020 Review Conference for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Gustavo Zlauvinen said in a letter on Friday that the tenth session was rescheduled and will be held in January 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Having considered all available options, I have reached the conclusion that the initial set of dates of 4-28 January 2022 is the most feasible one for the convening of the Review Conference," Zlauvinen said in the letter seen by Sputnik. "I will therefore request the Secretariat to book the necessary facilities and conference services for those dates."

The conference was initially scheduled to take place in April of 2020 at the United Nations headquarters in New York, but was postponed until August this year over pandemic-related concerns.

Zlauvinen said in the letter that after extensive consultations with state parties, it was decided the current coronavirus restrictions on access cannot ensure the holding of the conference in August.

In addition, Zlauvinen noted that in early October this year, he will convene informal consultations with all state parties to evaluate the situation and confirm the dates of the conference considering the "unpredictability" of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Gunfire Erupts at Assassinated Haitian President's Funeral, US Delegation Flees - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The funeral being held for assassinated Haitian president Jovenel Moise was interrupted by gunfire that prompted the US delegation to quickly leave the scene, the Miami Herald reported on Friday.

The US delegation, led by Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, includes Biden's top adviser for Latin America, Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere Juan Gonzales, and newly appointed US Special Envoy to Haiti Daniel Foote, as well as Ambassador to Haiti Michele Sison and Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Jeff Fortenberry.

Moise was assassinated earlier in July by armed gunmen that included several Colombian nationals with US military training. A total of 26 individuals have been detained in connection with the plot as of Wednesday.

The new Haitian Prime Minister, Ariel Henry, also attended the funeral. He was sworn into office on Tuesday, having been appointed to the position by Moises just two days before his death.

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UN Rights Chief Concerned By Iran's Response to Protests Over Water Shortages - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Friday expressed concern over the Iran authorities' violent response to demonstrators who took to the streets in the province of Khuzestan to protest water shortages. Protests erupted on July 15 in several cities across Khuzestan over severe water shortages and alleged mismanagement of resources. According to the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the authorities responded with a disproportionate use of force that resulted in at least four individuals being killed. State media said one police officer had also been killed.

"The impact of the devastating water crisis on life, health and prosperity of the people of Khuzestan should be the focus of the Government's attention, not the protests carried out by people driven to desperation by years of neglect," Bachelet said in a statement. "I am extremely concerned about the deaths and injuries that have occurred over the past week, as well as the widespread arrests and detention."

Bachelet said protesters who have been injured are avoiding going to medical facilities for fear of being arrested.

The UN rights chief called on Iran to urgently mitigate the impact of the water crisis in Khuzestan and implement policies ensuring the right to water in the long term.

Southwestern Iran plunged into a water crisis after experiencing the worst drought in the past 50 years. According to an Iranian water supply and sanitation company, 101 cities out of 304 are experiencing an acute shortage of water.

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Whelan Family Hopeful US Senate Resolution to Make Paul's Release From Russia 'Priority'

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The family of convicted spy Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence in Russia, said on Friday that it hopes the new Senate resolution will reaffirm the need for the US government to make his release a priority.

On Thursday, the US Senate passed a resolution calling on the Russian authorities to provide evidence of Whelan's guilt or release him.

"We hope that the Senate resolution will reaffirm the need for the State Department to make Paul's release a priority and to free him from this arbitrary punishment and detention," Paul's brother David said.

The US embassy in Moscow has meanwhile informed the Whelan family that Paul's solitary confinement has been extended for another 15 days.

"We don't know when the extension started or why the solitary confinement has been extended. We had thought the last one might end on Monday, July 19," he said.

Whelan's lawyer Vladimir Zherebenkov told Sputnik earlier this week that the legal defense team is now preparing a statement on his possible expulsion from Russia.

Paul Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained he is innocent and insisted that he came to Russia for a friend's wedding. Court papers have revealed that he has frequented Russia since 2007.

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US Baseball Team Cleveland Indians Changes Name to 'Guardians' Amid Controversy

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The US Major League Baseball (MLB) team Cleveland Indians has changed its name to the "Guardians" after being criticized for its name by Native Americans, the team announced in a video on Friday.

"There's always been Cleveland, that's the best part of our name, and now it's time to unite as one family, one community, who build the next era for this team and this city, to keep watch and guard what makes this game the greatest... together, we are all Cleveland Guardians," the video, posted on Twitter, said.

Native American activists have criticized the Cleveland team for its choice of name for being offensive to them. The team repeatedly denied it intend to disparage Native Americans.

The team's mascot, Chief Wahoo, was removed from the player's uniforms in 2019 for being a stereotypical depiction of a Native American, featuring red skin and a feather in the hair.

The team announced in 2020 that it would change the name after the 2021 season as the Washington Redskins football announced they would review the future use of the own name as well.

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Iraq Set to Have Much Broader Cooperation With US in Future - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Iraq is set to have much broader ties with the United States in various areas in the future, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said in a joint press availability with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday.

"Our relationships with the United States are not just military relationships but they are vast and broad relationships and in the future we will have a much broader cooperation in all fields that we mentioned," Hussein said.

On Thursday, US media reported the United States and Iraq are expected to agree on the pullout of US forces by the end of 2021.

Iraq does not need any more fighters because it already has those, Hussein was quoted as saying in the report. In addressing the question of what Iraq does need, Hussein said the government needs help in the areas of intelligence, training and air support.

Hussein is meeting with Blinken as part of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue to review Iraq's

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UN Security Council Condemns Turkish Cypriot Leaders for Reopening Varosha - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Friday issued a statement condemning the announcement by Turkish Cypriot authorities to reopen a part of Varosha for potential resettlement.

"The Security Council condemns the announcement in Cyprus by Turkish and Turkish Cypriot leaders on 20 July 2021 on the further reopening of a part of the fenced-off area of Varosha.

The Security Council expresses its deep regret regarding these unilateral actions that run contrary to its previous resolutions and statements," the statement said.

The UN Security Council further reaffirmed the status of Varosha outlined in relevant resolutions that consider attempts to settle any part of Varosha by people other than its inhabitants inadmissible and call to transfer this area to the administration of the United Nations.

"The Security Council calls for the immediate reversal of this course of action and the reversal of all steps taken on Varosha since October 2020," the statement said.

During Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Cyprus on Tuesday, the leader of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Ersin Tatar, announced that a segment of Varosha will be demilitarized and local residents will be able to apply to obtain property.

Several nations, including France, Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, have condemned Turkey's move.

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US to Cut Mortgage Payments, Extend Payment Periods to Stop COVID Home Foreclosures - White House

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is cutting by a quarter the mortgage payments for homeowners hit by hardship from the coronavirus pandemic measures

and moving missed payments until the end of the borrowing period to prevent foreclosures, the White House said on Friday.

The departments of Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture and Veterans Affairs are taking steps "to provide homeowners with a roughly 25 percent reduction in borrowers' monthly principal and interest payments to ensure they can afford to remain in their homes and build equity long-term", the White House said in a statement.

With more than 160 million Americans fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and more getting back to work, life is returning to normal for most people but many others still need continued assistance, the White House said.

"For homeowners who can resume their pre-pandemic monthly mortgage payment and where agencies have the authority, agencies will continue requiring mortgage servicers to offer options that allow borrowers to move missed payments to the end of the mortgage at no additional cost to the borrower."

The White House said in some cases, even larger reductions were possible, such as the new "COVID-19 Refund" option, where the Veteran Affairs Department will can purchase from the servicer a borrower's pandemic-era arrearages and, if needed, additional amounts of loan principal, to help distressed owners keep their homes.

The US economy has rebounded in 2021 at a growth rate of 6.4 percent, but the Federal Reserve has cautioned it does not expect full employment - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - to occur anytime soon. Officials have said of the 21 million jobs lost in 2020 during the height of the lockdowns and other restrictive measures, more than 7 million jobs are yet to return. The monthly unemployment rate in June stood at 5.9 percent.

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Blinken, Michigan Governor Discuss Case of Reporter Detained in Myanmar - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer discussed US government efforts to help release journalist Danny Fenster - a Michigan native - who was detained in Myanmar by the country's military junta in May, State Department spokesperson Ned Price on Friday.

"Governor Whitmer expressed thanks for the State Department's continued commitment to secure Fenster's release," Price said in a readout of the conversation.

Fenster, 37, worked as managing editor of the Frontier Myanmar news magazine and was detained on May 24 at Yangon International Airport as he attempted to board an airplane to leave the country.

Media reported in June that Fenster appeared before a special court in Yangon's Insein Prison to face charges under a law that criminalizes encouraging dissent against the Myanmar military. On February 1, the military seized control of Myanmar in a coup d'état that prompted protests throughout the country. The military authorities have said their action was justified given the

irregularities in the last election and have promised to transfer power after a new election is held.

Blinken and Whitmer also discussed the issue of Canadian energy giant Enbridge Energy's Line 5 pipeline, the readout said.

"Secretary Blinken noted that there is no formal bilateral process between the federal governments of the United States and Canada concerning Line 5," Price said.

In November, Whitmer announced the Michigan government was moving forward with its plan to shut down Enbridge's Line 5 pipeline through the Straits of Mackinac, citing the threat of oil spills to the environment and the economy.

The Canadian government has said the 540,000 barrels of predominantly western Canadian oil and natural gas flowing through the pipeline daily is essential to the operations of certain Canadian provinces and US states, including Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

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Blinken to Visit India, Kuwait on July 28 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to India and Kuwait on July 28 to discuss a range of issues with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior Kuwaiti officials, the State Department said on Friday.

"In New Delhi on July 28, Secretary Blinken will meet with External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss a wide range of issues including continued cooperation on COVID-19 response efforts, Indo-Pacific engagement, shared regional security interests, shared democratic values and addressing the climate crisis," the State Department said in a release. "Secretary Blinken will travel on July 28 to Kuwait City where he will meet with senior Kuwaiti officials to continue discussions of key bilateral issues that underscore the importance of our 60 years of diplomatic ties."